Stonewall riots sparked emergence of gay pride

By FRANK WHITWORTH

On June 27, 1969, gays took to the streets of New York City to protest police harassment and dehumanizing treatment at the Stonewall Inn. This began what would become a worldwide emergence of gays and lesbians from the closets and into the light of day. Tired of dehumanizing and repressive stereotypes foisted on them by those on the right, a few early brave souls stood up and said, "Look!! See who I am. I am not what they say I am. You need not fear and hate me. I am you."

Few could have known then that a defining moment had been reached. In the decades since, that tiny leak around the floodgates in Greenwich Village has grown into a flood of individuals coming out to families, friends and the world. This coming out was and is the backbone of the movement for gay and lesbian equality.

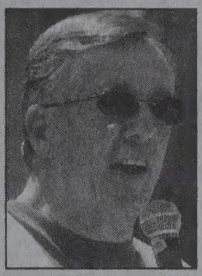
News reports of the incidents in Greenwich Village found me, at age 29, in Norfolk, Va., a very unhappy and self-hating individual. In denial about my sexual identity, I led a largely morose and lonely life.

The news from New York opened my eyes somewhat. I saw hundreds of people self-identifying as gay on TV news programs. I began to see that I was not alone.

A year later, I had begun a journey out of the closet into acceptance of who I was. Shortly thereafter, I became one of the founders of the Gay Freedom Movement of Virginia, the first legally incorporated gay organization in the state.

Our main task was to face head-on police harassment and brutality. We did this by taking every such case as far as possible in the courts. No arrest went unchallenged; no incident of harassment or brutality was ignored.

Organizations were being formed and direct action was springing up everywhere.



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Visibility became more and more important as a tool to counter the terrible stereotypes that spun, and still spin, from the intolerant on the right.

A new concept welled up inside us. We began to see that we were not what even many of us had come to believe we were. We began to see that the overwhelming majority of us were good citizens who loved our country, worked for a living, contributed to the community and lived positive and productive lives.

Those who came out early became role models for those who followed. A new feeling about ourselves emerged. Pride.

Our pride is in who we are as human beings — our total being. We have come to see that we are not ogres but, rather, productive parts of the community who live, love and work in it.

As you see reports on pride events around the country, I hope you will think of these things. Those who wonder why we have to flaunt it in your faces, as we have been accused of doing, should know that coming out of the closet is important to us in three ways:

- It leads to our acceptance of who we are and to the development of pride in ourselves and in the total person we are.
- By our visibility we best counter the lies and stereotypes that have been the tools of our oppressors.
- By our visibility, others who are facing the challenges of their own identity have us as role models to ease the way.

Whitworth, of Colorado Springs, has been a civil rights activist since the 1950s. He was a leader of Ground Zero, an organization committed to education around the subject of Colorado's Amendment 2 and gay rights. In 1995 he won a National Stonewall Award for lifelong contributions to the quality of life of gays and lesbians.

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